

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE E14

THE WASHINGTON POST
29 July 1982

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A Young Sadat Emerges From Lebanese Ashes

One of the most significant developments in the Lebanese tragedy is the rise to international prominence of Bashir Gemayel, 34, commander of Lebanon's Christian military forces. American intelligence analysts say they think he may be a young Anwar Sadat rising out of the ashes of the Lebanese war.

A charismatic leader, gifted orator and patient negotiator, Gemayel is regarded as a firm believer in western democracy, not a religious or political fanatic. His father, Pierre, led the national movement that ousted the French in 1943 and still heads the political party of Lebanon's Christian majority.

Now the younger Gemayel is being touted as the next civilian president of Lebanon, and perhaps the one man who may bring stability to the war-shattered, faction-torn country. His emergence as a political force is a cause of cautious optimism in U.S. intelligence circles. He is seen as solidly pro-West: he was educated at a French Catholic college in Beirut and at Southern Methodist University in Texas.

Gemayel's importance has not

been lost on the Kremlin. My intelligence sources tell me the Soviet Union has been courting Gemayel and the Christian forces secretly for several months. In contrast, the State Department has ignored several informal approaches by Gemayel's emissaries.

Fortunately, the Kremlin's ardent courtship of Gemayel has so far been rejected. "The Soviets approached us several months ago with offers of cultural exchanges and offers to build television and radio stations and train our people," a source close to Gemayel confided. "But they also had plans to establish a KGB station in our area. We were not willing to permit this."

The Lebanese reluctance to give the KGB a foothold in their postwar situation is understandable: according to intelligence sources, the Soviets had one of their strongest KGB posts, manned by 300 people, in areas once controlled by the Palestine Liberation Organization and Syrian occupation troops.

Painfully aware that their alliance with the PLO and the Syrians has not endeared them to the Lebanese, the Soviets are trying to regroup by playing up to the presumed dominant forces in postwar Lebanon. My intelligence sources are betting they won't succeed.

Actually, the United States is lucky it doesn't share this Lebanese resentment over the Syrians. The idea of covertly encouraging Syrian

troops to act as an occupation force to keep peace in Lebanon was apparently Henry A. Kissinger's brainstorm. Kissinger had hoped that the Syrians would rein in the PLO.

"The United States sent a special emissary, who told us not to oppose the Syrians," a Lebanese official recalled. "He said the Syrians of 1976 were like the Marines of 1958." Those troops were sent in by President Eisenhower as a warning to Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who was believed to be planning a military attack on Lebanon.

The Kissinger plan didn't work out, of course. Syrian troops were unable to control the PLO in Lebanon, and confined themselves to occupation of their chosen territory in the unhappy country.

The Christian Lebanese forces are also resentful of their portrayal in the American press as "right-wing phalangists" and "militia." They say the first label was pinned on them by the PLO, and, as for the second label, a Lebanese spokesman said, "How can anyone describe the strongest and best organized political party in the region and our 40,000-strong army as a 'militia'?"

Gemayel is equally ambivalent toward the Christian forces' support from Israel. He has stated publicly that "to save Lebanon, I would cooperate with anybody." And one U.S. expert said of Gemayel's relationship with the Israelis, "He won't kowtow to them. He's too independent."